

washingtonpost.com

## Bush Faced Dwindling Data on Iraq Nuclear Bid

By Walter Pincus  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Wednesday, July 16, 2003; Page A01

In recent days, as the Bush administration has defended its assertion in the president's State of the Union address that Iraq had tried to buy African uranium, officials have said it was only one bit of intelligence that indicated former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was reconstituting his nuclear weapons program.

But a review of speeches and reports, plus interviews with present and former administration officials and intelligence analysts, suggests that between Oct. 7, when President Bush made a speech laying out the case for military action against Hussein, and Jan. 28, when he gave his State of the Union address, almost all the other evidence had either been undercut or disproved by U.N. inspectors in Iraq.

By Jan. 28, in fact, the intelligence report concerning Iraqi attempts to buy uranium from Africa -- although now almost entirely disproved -- was the only publicly unchallenged element of the administration's case that Iraq had restarted its nuclear program. That may explain why the administration strived to keep the information in the speech and attribute it to the British, even though the CIA had challenged it earlier.

For example, in his Oct. 7 speech, Bush said that "satellite photographs reveal that Iraq is rebuilding facilities at [past nuclear] sites." He also cited Hussein's "numerous meetings with Iraqi nuclear scientists" as further evidence that the program was being reconstituted, along with Iraq's attempts to buy high-strength aluminum tubes "needed" for centrifuges used to enrich uranium.

But on Jan. 27 -- the day before the State of the Union address -- the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported to the U.N. Security Council that two months of inspections in Iraq had found that no prohibited nuclear activities had taken place at former Iraqi nuclear sites. As for Iraqi nuclear scientists, Mohamed ElBaradei told the Security Council, U.N. inspectors had "useful" interviews with some of them, though not in private. And preliminary analysis, he said, suggested that the aluminum tubes, "unless modified, would not be suitable for manufacturing centrifuges."

The next night, Bush delivered his speech, including the now-controversial 16-word sentence, "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

Of his October examples, only the aluminum tubes charge remained in January, but that allegation had a subtle caveat -- he described the tubes as merely "suitable" for nuclear weapons production. Without the statement on uranium, the allegation concerning aluminum tubes would have been the only nuclear-related action ascribed to Hussein since the early 1990s.

And the tubes had already been questioned not only by IAEA, but also by analysts in U.S. and British intelligence agencies.

The idea that Iraq was acquiring tubes for a nuclear program became public in September, shortly after the Bush administration began a campaign to marshal public, congressional and U.N. support for authority to attack Iraq if it did not disarm.

On Aug. 26, Vice President Cheney, the official most publicly vocal about Iraq as a nuclear threat, began the campaign when he told a Veterans of Foreign Wars audience: "Many of us are convinced that Saddam will acquire nuclear weapons fairly soon. Just how soon we cannot gauge."

On Sept. 8, the New York Times disclosed that intelligence showed that Iraq had "embarked on a worldwide hunt for materials to make an atomic bomb" by trying to purchase "specially designed aluminum tubes" that unidentified administration sources believed were for centrifuges to enrich uranium.

The story referred to Bush "hardliners" who argued that action should be taken because if they waited for proof that Hussein had a nuclear weapon, "the first sign of a smoking gun may be a mushroom cloud."

That day, Bush national security adviser Condoleezza Rice appeared on CNN's "Late Edition" and confirmed the Times story. She said the tubes "are only really suited for nuclear weapons programs, centrifuge programs." She also said, "The problem here is that there will always be some uncertainty about how quickly he can acquire nuclear weapons, but we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

Cheney also confirmed the Times story that day, on NBC's "Meet the Press," saying that "we don't have all the evidence," but enough of a picture "that tells us that he [Hussein] is in fact actively and aggressively seeking to acquire nuclear weapons."

What neither Rice nor Cheney said at the time was that Baghdad's first attempts to purchase the aluminum tubes, more than a year earlier, had by Sept. 8 led to a fairly open disagreement in the U.S. intelligence community on whether the tubes were for centrifuges or for artillery rockets in Iraq's military program.

Analysts from the State and Energy departments said the tubes were too long and too thick for centrifuges; CIA and Pentagon analysts said they could be cut down and reamed out. Their debate was continuing as the agencies were putting together the still-classified national intelligence estimate on Hussein's weapons program.

In July, the United States had intercepted one shipment and obtained a tube; it was coated with a protective chemical that would have had to be removed if it were to be put to a nuclear purpose.

The intelligence estimate, completed in mid-September, reflected the different views, but the final judgment said that "most" analysts leaned toward the view that the tubes had a nuclear purpose. When the British dossier on Iraq's weapons program was published on Sept. 24, it referred to the tubes, but noted that "there is no definitive intelligence that it is destined for a nuclear program."

In his State of the Union address, Bush did not indicate any disagreement over the use of the tubes. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, however, outlined the arguments involved when he spoke eight days later before the Security Council, where inspectors already had challenged the U.S. position on them.

On March 7, ElBaradei gave his final report to the Security Council before his inspectors were removed from Iraq on March 18. His conclusion was that "the IAEA had found no evidence or plausible indication of the revival of a nuclear weapons program in Iraq." He also said the documents that gave rise to the allegation that Iraq had tried to buy African uranium were forged.

On March 16, Cheney appeared again on "Meet the Press" and reiterated his views of the previous August about Hussein's nuclear program. "We know he's been absolutely devoted to trying to acquire nuclear weapons, and we believe he has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons." The war began three days later.

© 2003 The Washington Post Company